Nyungar language

Nyungar (/ˈnjʊŋɡər/; also **Noongar**) is an Australian Aboriginal language or dialect continuum, still spoken by members of the Noongar community, who live in the southwest corner of Western Australia. The 1996 census recorded 157 speakers; that number increased to 232 by 2006. The rigour of the data collection by the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data has been challenged, with the number of speakers believed to be considerably higher.[4]

Noongar was first recorded in 1801 by Matthew Flinders, who made a number of word lists.[5]

Contents

Dialects/languages of the Nyungar subgroup

Nyungar	
Noongar	
Region	Western Australia
Ethnicity	Noongar (Amangu, Ballardong, Yued, Kaneang, Koreng, Mineng, ?Njakinjaki, Njunga, Pibelmen, Pindjarup, Wardandi, Whadjuk, Wiilman, Wudjari)
Native speakers	475 (2016 census)[1]
Language family	Pama–Nyungan ■ Nyungic ■ **Nyungar**
Dialects	Wudjari (Kwetjman; incl. Goreng?) Minang (Mirnong) Bibbulman (Pipelman) Kaniyang (Kaneang) Wardandi Balardung (incl. Tjapanmay?) Yuat (Juat) ?Wiilman ?Wajuk (Whadjuk) ?Pinjarup
Writing system	Latin
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	nys – inclusive code Individual codes: xgg – Goreng xrg – Minang (Mirnong) xbp – Bibbulman (Pipelman) wxw – Wardandi

It is generally agreed that there was no single, standard Nyungar (or Noongar) language before European settlement: it was a subgroup (or possibly a dialect continuum) of closely related languages, whose speakers were differentiated geographically (and in some cases, by cultural practices). The dialects merged into the modern Nyungar language following colonisation. A 1990 conference organised by the Nyoongar Language Project Advisory Panel recognised that the Nyungar subgroup included at least three distinct languages. This was highlighted by a 2011 *Noongar Dictionary*, edited by Bernard Rooney, which was based on the dialect/language of Yuat (Juat), from the north west part of the Nyungar subgroup area.[6]

The highlighted area of the map shown on the right may correspond to the Nyungar subgroup. The subdivisions shown correspond to individual dialects/languages. In modern Nyungar these dialects/languages have merged. There is controversy in some cases as to whether all of these dialects/languages were part of the original Nyungar subgroup. Some may have been distinct languages and some may have belonged to neighbouring subgroups.

Many linguists believe that the northernmost language shown, Amangu, was not part of the Nyungar subgroup, was instead a part of the Kartu subgroup, and may have been a dialect of the Kartu language Nhanda. (As such, Amangu may have been synonymous with a dialect known as Nhanhagardi, which has also been classified, at different times, as a part of Nhanda, Nyungar, or Widi.)

There is a general consensus that the following dialects/languages belong to the Nyungar subgroup:[3] Wudjari, Minang, Bibelman (a.k.a. Pibelman; Bibbulman),[7] Kaneang (Kaniyang), Wardandi, Balardung (a.k.a. Ballardong; which probably included Tjapanmay/Djabanmai), and Yuat (Juat).

Wiilman, Whadjuk (Wajuk) and Pinjarup are also usually regarded as dialects of Nyungar, although this identification is not completely secure.

The Koreng (Goreng) people are thought to have spoken a dialect of, or closely related to, Wudjari, in which case their language would have been part of the Nyungar subgroup.

Njakinjaki (Nyakinyaki) was possibly a dialect of Kalaamaya – a language related to, but separate from, the original Nyungar subgroup.[7]

It is not clear if the Njunga (or Nunga) dialect was significantly different from Wudjari. However, according to Norman Tindale, the Njunga people rejected the name Wudjari and had adopted some of the customs of their non-Nyungar-speaking eastern neighbours, the Ngadjunmaya.[8]

	pnj – Pinjarup xwj – Wajuk (Whadjuk)
Linguist List	qsz (http://multitree.org/codes/qsz) Juat (Yuat)
Glottolog	nyun1247 (http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/nyun1247)[2]
AIATSIS[3]	W41 (https://collection.aiatsis.gov.au/austlang/language/W41)

ABORIGINAL GROUPS OF THE SOUTH WEST OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA
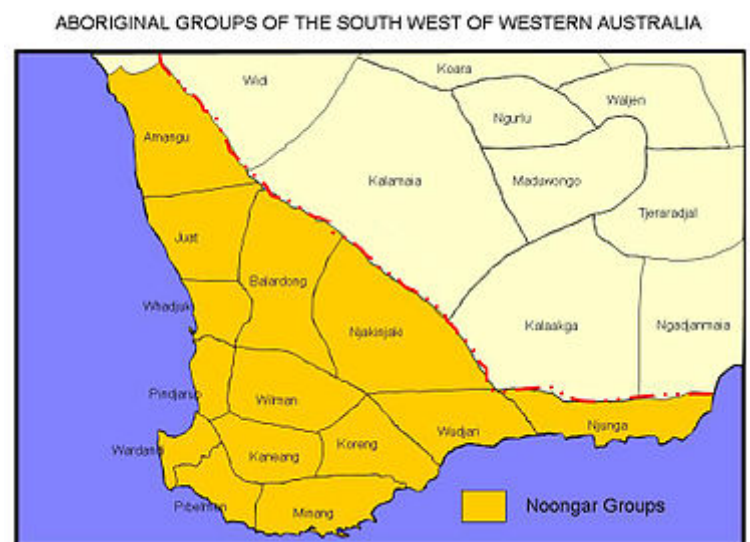

The Nyungar language subgroup, and its individual dialects/languages, before contact with Europeans.

Documentation

The Nyungar names for birds were included in Serventy and Whittell's *Birds of Western Australia* (1948), noting their regional variations.[9] A later review and synthesis of recorded names and consultation with Nyungars produced a list of recommended orthography and pronunciation for birds (2009) occurring in the region.[9] The author, Ian Abbott, also published these recommendations for plants (1983) and mammals (2001), and proposed that these replace other vernacular in common use.[10]

A number of small wordlists were recorded in the early days of the Swan River Colony, for example Robert Menli Lyon's 1833 publication *A Glance at the Manners and Language of Aboriginal Inhabitants of Western Australia*. Lyon acquired much of his information from Yagan while Yagan was incarcerated on Carnac Island. Despite the significance of Lyons work in being the first of its kind, George Fletcher Moore diary republished in 1884 described Lyons work

Map of Perth showing Nyungar names for places where recorded in the Open Street Map (https://www.openstreetmap.org/#map=9/-31.9527121/115.8604796) project, and English names where they are not.

as "containing many inaccuracies and much that was fanciful".[11] During August and October 1839 the *Perth Gazette* published *Vocabulary of the Aboriginal people of Western Australia* written by Lieutenant Grey of HM 83rd Regiment.[12][13] Grey spent twelve months studying the languages of the Nyungar people and came to the conclusion that there was much in common between them, just prior to the publication he received from Mr Bussel of the Busselton district a list of 320 words from that region which was near identical to those he had collected in the Swan River region. The work of Grey much to his disappointment was published in an unfinished list as he was leaving the colony, but he believed that the publication would assist in communication between settlers and Nyungar people. Also noted by Grey was that the Nyungar language had no soft *c* sound, there was no use of *f* and that *h* was very rarely used and never at the start of a word.[14]

Serious documentation of the Nyungar language began in 1842 with the publication of *A Descriptive Vocabulary of the Language in Common Use Amongst the Aborigines of Western Australia* by George Fletcher Moore, later republished in 1884 as part of the diary of George Fletcher Moore. This work included a substantial wordlist of Nyungar. The first modern linguistic research on Nyungar was carried out by Gerhardt Laves on the variety known as "Goreng", near Albany in 1930, but this material was lost for many years and has only recently been recovered. Beginning in the 1930s and then more intensively in the 1960s Wilfrid Douglas learnt and studied Nyungar, eventually producing a grammar, dictionary, and other materials.[15] More recently Nyungar people have taken a major role in this work as researchers, for example Rose Whitehurst who compiled the *Noongar Dictionary* in her work for the Noongar Language and Culture Centre.[16] Tim McCabe has recently finished a PhD in the Nyungar language, having been taught a variety of the language by Clive Humphreys of Kellerberrin, and is teaching Nyungar to inmates in Perth prisons.
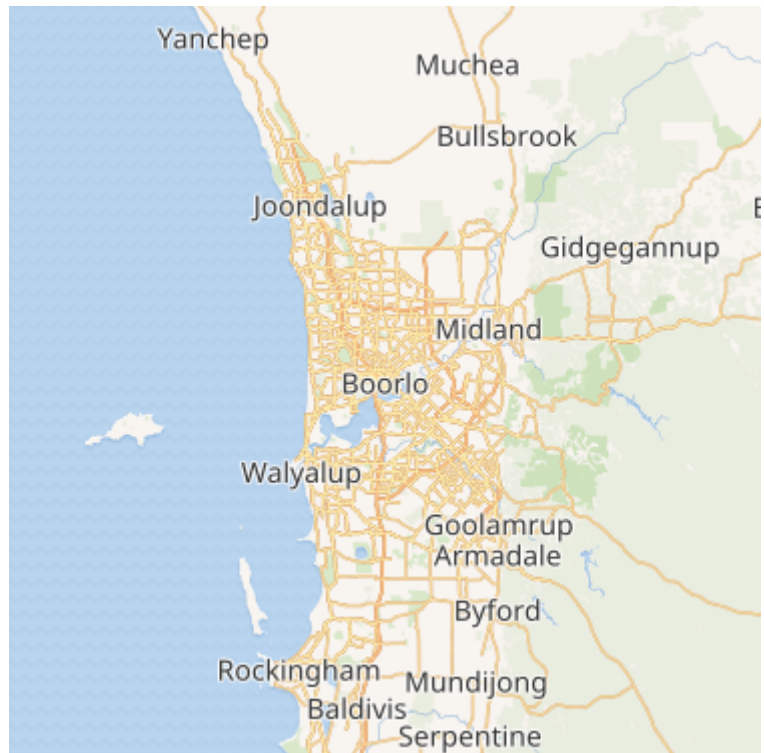
Peter Bindon and Ross Chadwick have compiled an authoritative cross referenced "A Nyoongar Wordlist: from the South West of Western Australia", by assembling material from all of the above writers in their original spelling. It is clear from this reference that the orthographies used did not only reflect dialectical differences, but also how the various authors "heard" and transcribed spoken Nyungar.[17]

Current situation

Today the Nyungar language is disputed as being endangered; there has been a revival of interest in recent years, and Professor Len Collard from the Indigenous Studies faculty at the University of Western Australia has challenged the science behind the claim, citing the lack of rigour in the data.[4] The Noongar Language and Culture Centre was set up by concerned individuals and has now grown to include offices in Bunbury, Northam and Perth. Authors such as Charmaine Bennell have released several books in the language.[19] Educators Glenys Collard and Rose Whitehurst started recording elders speaking using Noongar language in 1990, and by 2010 had 37 schools in the South West and Perth teaching the language.[20]

An English dialect with Nyungar admixture, known as **Neo-Nyungar**, is spoken by perhaps 8,000 ethnic Nyungar.[21]

Recently, the collaborative work of digitising and transcribing many word lists created by ethnographer Daisy Bates the 1900s at Daisy Bates Online[22] provides a valuable resource for those researching especially Western Australian languages.[23] The project is co-ordinated by Nick Thieburger, who works in collaboration with the National Library of Australia "to have all the microfilmed images from Section XII of the Bates papers digitised", and the project is ongoing.[24]

Language through the arts

Singer-songwriter Gina Williams has promoted the use of the language through song, including lullabies for children and a translation of the song "Moon River".[25]

An adaption and translation of the Shakespearean tragedy *Macbeth* into Nyungar is on the programme for the 2020 Perth Festival. The play, named *Hecate*, is produced by Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company with Bell Shakespeare, and performed by an all-Noongar cast. The play took years to translate, and has sparked wider interest in reviving the language.[25][26]

0:00 / 0:00

Djena djen, performed by Noongarpedia mob written by Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project

Neo-Nyungar	
Region	SW Australia
Native speakers	(undated figure of 8,000)[18]

Language family	Indo-European
	• Germanic
	  • West Germanic
	    • Anglic
	      • English
	        • Australian English
	          • **Neo-Nyungar**

Language codes	
ISO 639-3	–
Linguist List	`eng-neo (http://multitree.org/codes/eng-neo)`
Glottolog	*None*

Phonology

The following are the sounds in the Noongar language:[16]

Vowels

	Front	Central	Back
High	i		u
Mid	e		o
Low		a	

Consonants

	Peripheral		Laminal	Apical	
	Labial	**Velar**	**Palatal**	**Alveolar**	**Retroflex**
Stop	b/p	ɡ/k	ɟ/c	d/t	ɖ/ʈ
Nasal	m	ŋ	ɲ	n	ɳ
Lateral			ʎ	l	ɭ
Rhotic				r	
Approximant	w		j		ɻ

Vocabulary

Many words vary in a regular way from dialect to dialect, depending on the area. For example: the words for bandicoot include *quernt* (south) and *quenda* (west); the word for water may be *käip* (south) or *kapi* (west), or the word for fire may vary from *kaall* to *karl*.

A large number of modern place names in Western Australia end in *-up*, such as Joondalup, Nannup and Manjimup. This is because in the Noongar language, *-up* means "place of". For example, the name Ongerup means "place of the male kangaroo".[27] The word "gur", "ger" or "ker" in Noongar meant a gathering. Daisy Bates suggests that central to Noongar culture was the "karlupgur", referring to those that gather around the hearth (*karlup*).[28]

Nyungar words which have been adopted into Western Australian English, or more widely in English, include the given name Kylie "boomerang",[29] *gilgie* or *jilgie*, the freshwater crayfish *Cherax quinquecarinatus*, and *gidgie* or *gidgee*, "spear". The word for smoke, *karrik*, was adopted for the family of compounds known as karrikins. The word *kodj* "to be hit on the head" comes from the term for a stone axe.[29] The word *quokka*, denoting a type of small macropod, is thought to come from Nyungar.[30]

Pronunciation

Letter	English sound	Nyunga sound
B	**b**ook	boodjar
D	**d**og	darbal
dj or tj	**d**ew	djen or nortj
ny	ca**ny**on	nyungar
ng	si**ng**	ngow

Grammar

Nyungar grammar is fairly typical of Pama–Nyungan languages in that it is agglutinating, with words and phrases formed by the addition of affixes to verb and noun stems.[31] Word order in Nyungar is free, but generally tends to follow a subject–object–verb pattern.[32] Because there are several varieties of Nyungar,[33] aspects of grammar, syntax and orthography are highly regionally variable.

Verbs

Like most Australian languages, Nyungar has a complex tense and aspect system.[34] The plain verb stem functions as both the infinitive and the present tense. Verb phrases are formed by adding suffixes or adverbs to the verb stem.[35]

The following adverbs are used to indicate grammatical tense or aspect.[36][37]

- boorda   later (*boorda ngaarn*, "will eat later")
- mila   future (*mila ngaarn*, "will eat after a while")
- doora   conditional (*doora ngaarn*, "should eat")

Some tense/aspect distinctions are indicated by use of a verb suffix. In Nyungar, the past or preterite tense is the same as the past participle.[36]

- -iny   progressive (*ngaarniny*, "eating")
- -ga   past (*ngaarnga*, "ate, had eaten")

A few adverbs are used with the past tense to indicate the amount of time since the event of the verb took place.[36]

- gorah   a long time (*gorah gaarnga*, "ate a long time ago")
- karamb   a short time (*karamb ngaarnga*, "ate a little while ago")
- gori   just now (*gori ngaarnga*, "just ate")

Nouns

There are no articles in Nyungar.[38][39] Nouns (as well as adjectives) take a variety of suffixes which indicate grammatical case, specifically relating to motion or direction, among other distinctions.[40][41]

- -(a)k   locative (*boorn-ak*, "in the tree")
- -(a)k   purposive (*daatj-ak*, "for meat")
- -(a)l   instrumental (*kitj-al*, "by means of a spear")
- -an/ang   genitive (*noon-an kabarli*, "your grandmother")
- -(a)p   place-of (*boorn-ap*, "place of trees")
- -koorl   illative (*keba-koorl*, "towards the water")
- -ool   ablative (*kep-ool*, "away from the water")
- -ngat   adessive (*keba-ngat*, "near the water")
- -(a)biny   translative (*moorditj-abiny*, "becoming strong")
- -mokiny   semblative (*dwert-mokiny*, "like a dog")
- -boorong   having or existing (*moorn-boorong*, "getting dark")
- -broo   abessive (*bwoka-broo*, "without a coat")
- -kadak   comitative (*mereny-kadak*, "with food")

- -mit   used-for (*kitjal baal daatj-mit barangin'y*, "a spear is used for hunting kangaroos")
- -koop   belong-to, inhabitant of (*bilya-koop*, "river dweller")
- -djil   emphatic (*kwaba-djil*, "very good")
- -mart   species or family (*bwardong-mart*, "crow species")
- -(i)l   agentive suffix used with ergative

The direct object of a sentence (what might be called the Dative) can also be expressed with the locative suffix -*ak*.[42][43]

Grammatical number is likewise expressed by the addition of suffixes. Nouns that end in vowels take the plural suffix -*man*, whereas nouns that end in consonants take -*gar*.[44][45] Inanimate nouns, that is, nouns that do not denote human beings, can also be pluralized by the simple addition of a numeral.[45]

Pronouns

Nyungar pronouns are declined exactly as nouns, taking the same endings.[43][46] Thus, possessive pronouns are formed by the addition of the regular genitive suffix -*ang*.[46] Conversely, object pronouns are formed by the addition of the -*any* suffix.[46] Notably, there does not appear to be a great deal of pronominal variation across dialectal lines.[44]

	Subject	Object	Possessive
I	ngany	nganyany	nganyang
he/she/it	baal	baalany	baalang
they	baalap	baalabany	baalabang
you	noonook	noonany	noonang
we	ngalak	ngalany	ngalang

Nyungar features a set of dual number pronouns which identify interpersonal relationships based on kinship or marriage. The "fraternal" dual pronouns are used by and for people who are siblings or close friends, "paternal" dual pronouns are used by and for people who are paternal relatives (parent-child, uncle-niece and so forth),[47] and "marital" pronouns are used by and for people who are married to each other or are in-laws.[48]

	Fraternal	Paternal	Marital
1st person	ngali	ngala	nganik
2nd person	nubal	nubal	nubin
3rd person	bula	bulala	bulen

Typically, if the subject of a sentence is not qualified by a numeral or adjective, a subject-marker pronoun is used. Thus: *yongka **baal** boyak yaakiny* (lit. "kangaroo **it** on-rock standing), "the kangaroo is standing on the rock."[49]

Adjectives

Adjectives precede nouns.[49] Some adjectives form the comparative by addition of the suffix *-jin* but more generally the comparative is formed by reduplication, a common feature in Pama-Nyungan languages.[50] The same is also true for intensified or emphatic adjectives, comparable to the English word "very". The superlative is formed by the addition of *-jil*.[51]

Negation

Statements are negated by adding the appropriate particle to the end of the sentence. There are three negation particles:

- *bart*   used generally with verbs
- *yuada*   used generally with adjectives

There is also an adverbial negation word, *bru*, roughly equivalent to the English "less" or "without".[52]

Interrogatives

Questions are formed by the addition of the interrogative interjection *kannah* alongside the infinitive root of the verb.[53]

See also

- Boodjar Nyungar Placenames

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48. Symmons 1842, p.xv.
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External links

- Bibliography of Bibbulman language and people resources (http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/collections/language_bibs/bibbulman.pdf), at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
- Noongarpedia word list (https://incubator.wikimedia.org/wiki/Wt/nys/Main_Page) (under construction)
- Billardong Noongar Waangkany Ballardong Noongar dictionary (http://www.wheatbeltnrm.org.au/sites/default/files/knowledge_hub/documents/Nyungar%20Dictionary%20-%20Final%20-%20Website.pdf)